



Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011

Volume 12 | Number 2

Article 19

2000

Explaining the Temple to the World: James E. Talmage's Monumental Book, *The House of the Lord*

David Rolph Seely

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Seely, David Rolph (2000) "Explaining the Temple to the World: James E. Talmage's Monumental Book, *The House of the Lord*," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011*: Vol. 12 : No. 2 , Article 19. Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr/vol12/iss2/19>

This Mormon Studies is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011 by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.



NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title Explaining the Temple to the World: James E. Talmage's Monumental Book, *The House of the Lord*

Author(s) David Rolph Seely

Reference *FARMS Review of Books* 12/2 (2000): 415-25.

ISSN 1099-9450 (print), 2168-3123 (online)

Abstract Review of *The House of the Lord: A Study of Holy Sanctuaries, Ancient and Modern: A Special Reprint of the 1912 First Edition* (1998), by James E. Talmage.

EXPLAINING THE TEMPLE TO THE WORLD:
JAMES E. TALMAGE'S MONUMENTAL BOOK,
THE HOUSE OF THE LORD

David Rolph Seely

On 16 September 1911, the *Salt Lake Tribune* published an account of certain individuals who had secretly taken pictures of the interior of the Salt Lake Temple and who had attempted to sell them to the church. The headlines read: "Photographs secretly taken of Mormon Temple's interior; sent for sale to Church chief. President replies: 'Church will not negotiate with thieves and blackmailers.'"¹ The blackmail scheme was perpetrated by Max Florence, who was at the time in New York City trying to sell sixty-eight unauthorized photographs of the interior of the Salt Lake Temple. Florence had employed the help of a recent convert to the church, Gisbert Bossard, who, disenchanted with the administration of the church, had, assisted by a gardener for the temple grounds, gained access to the Salt Lake Temple and had taken a series of photographs of the interior of the Salt Lake Temple. Apparently motivated by money and "revenge"

1. As discussed by Nelson B. Wadsworth, *Set in Stone, Fixed in Glass: The Great Mormon Temple and Its Photographers* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 355–59.

Review of James E. Talmage. *The House of the Lord: A Study of Holy Sanctuaries, Ancient and Modern: A Special Reprint of the 1912 First Edition*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998. xix + 209, with foreword, preface, appendix, index, photo credits, and 79 black-and-white plates. \$44.95.

on the church, these individuals had taken the pictures when the Salt Lake Temple was closed for renovation during the summer of 1911. Florence and Bossard had sent a letter to the First Presidency with a proposal of blackmail—that the church would give them \$100,000 and the photographs would be returned; otherwise, they would be shown publicly. President Joseph F. Smith, the recipient of the letter, was outraged, and his response was, “I will make no bargain with thieves or traffickers in stolen goods. I prefer to let the law deal with them.”²

From this incident the idea for the book *House of the Lord* was conceived. Joseph F. Smith responded to the affair on 21 September by writing a telegram to the mission president in New York: “Referring to temple pictures incident, you are hereby authorized to make public statement to the effect that in view of what has happened, it is our intention to publish in book form in that year future interior and exterior views of all our temples, giving full and accurate descriptions of the same. Also object and purposes for which temples are erected. Will gladly furnish first class views to magazines and moving picture people.”³

The public had always been curious about and interested in what went on in the Latter-day Saint temples. Because of the sacred nature of the temple ordinances, Latter-day Saints do not discuss outside the temple what happens inside. At the Reed Smoot trials of 1903–7, several apostate Mormons had publicly testified, one even repeating for the record some of the contents of the temple ceremony word for word. All this attention led to a great public interest in the temple and what transpired inside and an increased effort by the church to maintain the sanctity of the temple and the temple ordinances, a situation that Florence and Bossard hoped to capitalize on.

2. An account of this incident can be found in Wadsworth, *Set in Stone, Fixed in Glass*, 355–78; Kent Walgren, “Inside the Salt Lake Temple: Gisbert Bossard’s 1911 Photographs,” *Dialogue* 29/3 (1996): 1–43; and Harvard S. Heath, foreword to *The House of the Lord*, Signature edition, v–xiii.

3. *Salt Lake Telegram*, 21 September 1911, 1, as found in Wadsworth, *Set in Stone, Fixed in Glass*, 363.

The idea to publish a book with photographs of the temple was apparently James E. Talmage's. After reading the report in the newspaper, Talmage, then acting president of the University of Utah and also author of the work *Articles of Faith* (published in 1899), had immediately written to the First Presidency and proposed that the church take the offensive, so to speak, and publish a book describing the purposes of Latter-day Saint temples and temple worship both to members and nonmembers. This preemptive strike, Dr. Talmage suggested, should include a series of clear, high-quality photographs of the interiors and exteriors of existing temples, to be published by the church. The First Presidency readily approved and assigned Talmage the task of writing the volume.⁴ A letter from the First Presidency to Talmage said:

Your communication of the 18th inst. suggesting the publication of a booklet dealing with temples in general and with modern temples in particular, to contain interior as well as exterior views of our temples, was considered at our Council meeting yesterday, resulting in an action favoring your suggestion; also, in an action appointing you to prepare the manuscript in the suggested booklet, the same to be revised by a committee to be appointed by ourselves for that purpose. . . . We have arranged with Bro. Ralph Savage to take the interior views of the Salt Lake Temple, and we would like you to supervise the work.⁵

And thus began the church's attempt to publicly explain the temple—the House of the Lord—to the world. Talmage, assigned to work on the book on 22 September 1911, was called and ordained an apostle in the middle of his work on 8 December 1911 and completed the book on 30 September 1912.

James E. Talmage's *The House of the Lord: A Study of Holy Sanctuaries, Ancient and Modern* was published by the church in 1912 and consisted of 238 pages, including forty-six plates with descriptive

4. Wadsworth, *Set in Stone, Fixed in Glass*, 365–66.

5. *Ibid.*, 366.

captions. The plates were mostly the work of Ralph Savage and included pictures of the Kirtland, Nauvoo, Salt Lake, St. George, Logan, and Manti Temples—the six temples that had been built by that time. Thirty-one of the photos were of the interior of the Salt Lake Temple, accomplishing one of the main goals of the book: to defuse the sensational claims of Florence and Bossard. These photographs illustrated for the world what the interiors of the temples looked like, explained areas of the temple that might not be seen by most members of the church, and celebrated the craftsmanship of the Salt Lake Temple. Of particular interest was plate 27, a photograph of the Holy of Holies with a detailed description of the room and its stained glass window—“a splendid art-window” (p. 139) picturing the visitation of the Father and the Son to Joseph Smith in the Sacred Grove.

Since *The House of the Lord* was authorized by the church and written by an apostle, it had a significant and long-lasting effect on nonmembers and members alike. The second edition of the book was published by Bookcraft in 1962, incorporating corrections of typographical errors and accompanied by additional pictures and brief statements about temples that had been built since 1912. In the second edition Bookcraft elected to delete plate 27, the photograph of the Holy of Holies. In 1968, Deseret Book published a revised edition that replaced the original photographs with sixteen color plates of the interior of the Salt Lake Temple and a few of the more modern temples. In addition, the revised edition included three appendixes, written by William James Mortimer, describing the remodeling of the interior of the Salt Lake Temple and the changes to the Temple Block since 1912, as well as providing a list and a description of the temples that had been built since Talmage wrote the book.⁶ Wadsworth's work, *Set in Stone, Fixed in Glass*, reviewed the publication history and included several of the Savage photographs originally published in *The House of the Lord*.⁷

6. Taken from Heath's discussion of the publication of *The House of the Lord* in the foreword to the Signature edition, xi–xiii.

7. Many of the Savage photographs were published in a book entitled *The Salt Lake Temple: A Monument to a People* (Salt Lake City: University Services, 1983). Several of the

The Signature edition of this work is described on the dust jacket as “A Special Reprint of the 1912 First Edition.”⁸ A more accurate description can be found on the verso of the title page: “Except for the front matter, foreword, new photographs, and appendix, the text of this special, large-format edition of *The House of the Lord: A Study of Holy Sanctuaries Ancient and Modern* by James E. Talmage, is an exact reprint of the 1912 first edition ‘Published by the Church’ in Salt Lake City.” The foreword is a brief but insightful piece by Harvard S. Heath, curator of the Utah and American West archives at Brigham Young University. Heath outlines biographical information about Talmage and traces the history of the writing and publication of *The House of the Lord*, including some information on the changes made in the volume through its various editions, most notably the eventual deletion of the original photographs in modern editions of the work.

The appendix reproduces John A. Widtsoe’s well-known and widely circulated talk on “Temple Worship,” given on 12 October 1920 under the auspices of the Genealogical Society of Utah at the Assembly Hall on Temple Square.

The Signature edition includes seventy-nine black-and-white plates, reprinting the forty-six original photographs from Talmage’s book and including, ironically, twenty-three of the Bossard photographs, “discovered” beneath the floor of the old fire-damaged Florence home in Farmington in 1945.⁹ Additional plates by other photographers, known and unknown, are also included. These photographs are usually presented as “alternate views” of interior scenes originally appearing in *The House of the Lord*. As noted by Wadsworth, the juxtaposition of the Savage and Bossard photographs demonstrates the relatively poor quality of the Bossard photographs¹⁰ and heightens one’s appreciation for Talmage’s choice of

Savage photographs were reproduced in Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, *Every Stone a Sermon* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1992).

8. The pagination of the 1912 edition is familiar to many Latter-day Saints since it is the edition used in the Infobases CD-ROM.

9. Wadsworth, *Set in Stone, Fixed in Glass*, 377–78.

10. *Ibid.*, 359.

photographs and his informative captions. While Heath briefly describes the situation with Florence and Bossard, the volume could have used a paragraph somewhere justifying the inclusion of the Bossard photographs and further explaining their significance.

The Signature reissue of this work is an invitation to reconsider the origin and significance of *The House of the Lord* and to reread this book eighty-eight years after its initial publication. Whether one reads the 1912 edition or one of the later editions, a wonderful perspective on temples and temple work can be gained.

Talmage's *House of the Lord* is a monumental work. Talmage addressed his work to all who were interested:

Among the numerous sects and churches of the present day, the Latter-day Saints are distinguished as builders of Temples. . . . It is not surprising that great and wide-spread interest is manifest respecting this peculiarity of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, nor that questions are continually arising as to the purpose and motive behind this great labor, and the nature of the ordinances administered in these modern Houses of the Lord. To answer some of these questions, and to place within the reach of earnest inquirers authentic information concerning the doctrine and practice of Temple ministration, this book has been written. (p. xv)

Talmage was not the first to write about the temple to the public. In his preface he lists four pamphlets primarily about the Salt Lake Temple—written by Janne M. Sjodahl, James H. Anderson, and D. M. McCallister, as well as one issued by the *Deseret News*—that had been published and circulated in Salt Lake City prior to 1912. However, his *The House of the Lord* is one of the classics of Latter-day Saint writing. As a classic, this book both reflects the best of Latter-day Saint understanding of temples and provides the standard for the almost eighty-eight years of scholarship that have followed. Indeed, this work is the cornerstone of scholarship concerning Latter-day Saint temples.

Most important, Talmage's book is readable. He writes in a clear, concise, logical, and elegant style. He has the ability to frame con-

cepts of the temple within the larger principles and ordinances of the gospel, and he follows a simple train of logic and grounds his discussion in the scriptures. Because he was an apostle and the book was sanctioned and published by the church, LDS members, authorities, and scholars have felt comfortable both using it as a model for their own work as well as quoting its text when explaining the temple to nonmembers and members alike—but especially to those who are preparing to enter the temple.

The House of the Lord has eleven chapters. Talmage reviews the issue of ancient and modern sanctuaries (chap. 1), discusses temples from the Old and New Testament periods (chap. 2), illustrates the need for latter-day temples (chap. 3), and describes the ordinances of the modern temple (chap. 4). Talmage then tells the history of the temples of the restoration, starting with the Kirtland and Nauvoo Temples (chap. 5) and proceeding to the Salt Lake Temple (chap. 6). He then describes the Salt Lake Temple (both exterior and interior, chaps. 7–8), the Temple Block (chap. 9), and other Utah temples (chap. 10). He concludes by ascribing the differences between ancient and modern temples to their administration by the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods, respectively.

Talmage sounds a striking note for historical reflection in his explanation of the need for temples in modern times. Writing in 1912, he describes the building of the Kirtland and Nauvoo Temples and then the first four temples in Utah: St. George, Logan, Manti, and Salt Lake City. He concludes with pride that in the eighty-two years since the restoration, “we have six of these sacred structures already erected in the present and last dispensation of the Priesthood—the dispensation of the fulness of times.”¹¹ The 1968 edition records nine more temples in an appendix, and the 1974 an additional three—making eighteen temples in all. (I remember being able as a young child in the mid-1960s to recognize and recite the fifteen temples of the restoration.) Just twenty-six years later, in 2000, one hundred temples are completed and many more have been announced and are in various stages of construction.

11. Talmage, *The House of the Lord*, Signature edition, 8; see 1974 reprint of the 1968 revised edition, 13.

Talmage's writing teaches us another impressive lesson. Throughout his work, he bases his discussion in scripture, especially the modern revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants. In some ways, this model is still instructive for the student of temples—much of our understanding is based on the written scriptural record. I recall the day in 1973 when we as missionaries in the Salt Lake Mission Home were privileged to participate in two sessions in the Salt Lake Temple, at the conclusion of which we spent a couple of hours in the Assembly Room in the temple; there the president of the church, Harold B. Lee, instructed us on temples and temple worship and allowed us to ask questions. On that November day, President Lee answered every one of our questions by reading to us from the scriptures—most often from the Doctrine and Covenants.

Talmage reflects the LDS understanding that latter-day temples are a continuation of temple building and temple worship from antiquity. This is evidenced by the book's subtitle, *A Study of Holy Sanctuaries, Ancient and Modern*. While much of Talmage's work on ancient temples reflects the standard biblical scholarship of the time,¹² he brought this scholarship to the forefront of LDS thinking. Although his work is largely descriptive of ancient temples—with little specific analysis as to the relationship between ancient and latter-day temples—his approach has provided a model for LDS scholarship from his time to the present. Indeed, many Latter-day Saint studies on ancient temples discuss their significance for modern temples. All recent LDS introductions to the temple and temple worship follow Talmage and include a chapter about the history of ancient temple worship.¹³ Most notably, the recent official publication of the church, *Temples of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day*

12. He quotes from the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 11th edition, and from *Smith's Bible Dictionary*.

13. John K. Edmunds, *Through Temple Doors* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1978); Boyd K. Packer, *The Holy Temple* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1981); Royden G. Derrick, *Temples in the Last Days* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987); Allen H. Barber, *Celestial Symbols: Symbolism in Doctrine, Religious Traditions and Temple Architecture* (Bountiful, Utah: Horizon, 1989); and Richard O. Cowan, *Temples to Dot the Earth* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989).

Saints, includes Talmage's chapter 1 of *The House of the Lord*, "A History of Temples."¹⁴ Just as Talmage framed his understanding of Latter-day Saint temples within the larger subject of temples from the beginning, numerous scholarly books and articles examine ancient temples from the Latter-day Saint point of view.¹⁵ For example, Talmage notes, like many biblical scholars, that the first templelike sanctuary was the Garden of Eden; likewise, Jacob encountering God at Bethel and Moses communing with God on Mount Sinai make these places sanctuaries. Recently, LDS scholars have written on each of these topics, building on the foundation laid by Talmage.¹⁶

Another great contribution of Talmage is that he established the parameters for discussion of the sacred ordinances in the temple. *The House of the Lord* was written in the aftermath of the Smoot trials, at a time when the sacred oaths, covenants, and teachings of the temple had been exposed to the public and ridiculed in the media—perhaps similarly to some of the so-called exposés of the last several decades. Latter-day Saints covenant to restrict discussion of these sacred things to the confines of the temple. At the same time, they face the challenges of preparing their children, converts, and members of

14. James E. Talmage, "A History of Temples," in *Temples of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1999), 52–61. Originally titled "A Pre-view of the Subject" in *The House of the Lord*.

15. See, for example, Hugh W. Nibley, *Temple and Cosmos* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992); Donald W. Parry, ed., *Temples of the Ancient World: Ritual and Symbolism* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1994); Matthew B. Brown and Paul T. Smith, *Symbols in Stone* (American Fork, Utah: Covenant Communications, 1997); Matthew B. Brown, *The Gate of Heaven: Insights on the Doctrines and Symbols of the Temple* (American Fork, Utah: Covenant Communications, 1999); Donald W. Parry and Stephen D. Ricks, *The Temple in Time and Eternity* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1999). A comprehensive list of LDS scholarship discussing LDS temple worship in light of ancient temples and temple worship can be found in Matthew B. Brown's review of *The Mysteries of Godliness*, by David J. Buerger, *FARMS Review of Books* 10/1 (1998): 118–20 n. 41.

16. Donald W. Parry, "Garden of Eden: Prototype Sanctuary," in *Temples of the Ancient World*, 126–51; Andrew C. Skinner, "Jacob in the Presence of God," in *Thy People Shall Be My People and Thy God My God: The 22d Annual Sidney B. Sperry Symposium* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 136–49; and Donald W. Parry, "Sinai as Sanctuary and Mountain of God," in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 1:482–500.

their branches and wards to receive their temple blessings and of answering questions by their friends and neighbors, as well as participating in church lessons and discussions about temples and temple worship. What is appropriate to talk about and how much can be said about the temple outside its holy walls is an important question. Talmage's book has provided a host of significant quotations that can be used both in learning and teaching about the temple. For example, his classic discussion of the temple endowment (1912 edition, pp. 84–85) can be found in virtually every LDS book about the temple:¹⁷

The Temple Endowment, as administered in modern temples, comprises instruction relating to the significance and sequence of past dispensations, and the importance of the present as the greatest and grandest era in human history. This course of instruction includes a recital of the most prominent events of the creative period, the condition of our first parents in the Garden of Eden, their disobedience and consequent expulsion from that blissful abode, their condition in the lone and dreary world when doomed to live by labor and sweat, the plan of redemption by which the great transgression may be atoned, the period of the great apostasy, the restoration of the Gospel with all its ancient powers and privileges, the absolute and indispensable condition of personal purity and devotion to the right in present life, and a strict compliance with Gospel requirements.

As will be shown, the temples erected by the Latter-day Saints provide for the giving of these instructions in separate rooms, each devoted to a particular part of the course; and by this provision it is possible to have several classes under instruction at one time.

The ordinances of the endowment embody certain obligations on the part of the individual, such as covenant and promise to observe the law of strict virtue and chastity; to be charitable, benevolent, tolerant and pure; to devote both talent and material means to the spread of truth and the uplift-

17. See, for example, Cowan, *Temples to Dot the Earth*, 53; Derrick, *Temples in the Last Days*, 32; Edmunds, *Through Temple Doors*, 77–78; Packer, *The Holy Temple*, 154, 162.

ing of the race; to maintain devotion to the cause of truth; and to seek in every way to contribute to the great preparation that the earth may be made ready to receive her King,—the Lord Jesus Christ. With the taking of each covenant and the assuming of each obligation a promised blessing is pronounced, contingent upon the faithful observance of the conditions.

No jot, iota, or tittle of the temple rites is otherwise than uplifting and sanctifying. In every detail the endowment ceremony contributes to covenants of morality of life, consecration of person to high ideals, devotion to truth, patriotism to nation, and allegiance to God. The blessings of the House of the Lord are restricted to no privileged class; every member of the Church may have admission to the temple with the right to participate in the ordinances thereof, if he comes duly accredited as of worthy life and conduct.

The church, of course, has prepared official publications to provide information to the members of the church in this regard, and Talmage's quotation is found there as well, eighty-eight years later, as the best and most appropriate explanation of the temple endowment.¹⁸ Publications that go beyond the bounds established by Talmage are often received by Latter-day Saints as inappropriately discussing sacred things.

Talmage's *The House of the Lord* is a great book and one worth rereading. The words of an editorial in the *Deseret Evening News*, 2 October 1912, admonish: "This is a book that should be found in every library, and especially among the literary treasures of the Latter-day Saints. The author is sufficient guarantee for the accuracy of the information given and the soundness of the doctrine it contains."¹⁹ This new publication of the 1912 edition will be appreciated by many, especially those who enjoy the historic photographs. Others may benefit by simply dusting off other, more affordable editions that have sat on the shelf for many years.

18. *Temples of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 44.

19. Quoted from Heath, foreword, xii.